Tsar Kor

(A Legend of Cherdyn)
Adapted into literary English from the Russian of K. Zhakov
Mythological names, toponyms, and epic style preserved

I

The yellow-crimson moon rose behind the distant peaks of the “Stone Belt” and poured its light upon the city of Iskor, perched like an eagle’s nest atop an impregnable cliff, ringed below by dark forests. Grey walls and tall corner towers shimmered in pale amber. The spearheads and sabers of the city guard glinted with wandering fires in the beams of the rising moon. Gabled roofs within the walls caught the lunar glow and cast long shadows over silent streets.

No sound disturbed the city—its people slept peacefully, forgetting both joy and care. None stirred when shafts of moonlight burst through windows glazed with mica, illuminating floors, walls, and white stoves. Only in one lofty tower did torches burn, spilling rivers of light onto the empty, shadowed lanes. There, a great feast unfolded: benevolent Tsar Kor entertained his favorites and folk heroes deep into the night.

At a long table sat his nobles upon pine benches: famed Burmat, illustrious Kagamort, valiant Porsyur—and beside them, the Tsar’s sons: elder Redigar, who had wandered far through Biarmia, and younger Michamort, fair as dawn. Among them, clad in a crimson kaftan, sat the mighty, red-bearded Tsar Kor himself.

The foaming mead-bowl passed swiftly from hand to hand, followed by silver cups brimming with foreign wine. The table groaned beneath northern bounty: birds of every kind—grouse, blackcock—and fish from Kolva, Vishera, and the mighty mountain Pechora: salmon, nelma, whitefish, pike, all resting calmly on platters.

In a corner sat the bard, plucking solemn, ancient melodies on a timeworn domra—songs of old heroes and the deeds of Tsar Kor.

And thus he sang:

> Our mighty, radiant Kor,
> Red-bearded hero bright,
> Whose golden curls gleam like sunlit ore!
> Once he marched to war
> Against the Voguls and Ob-Ugrians,
> Journeying eastward—
> With him, countless warriors.
> They flowed like rivers, crossed mountains and taiga,
> Ever eastward, deeper into the hills,
> Where Kor sought his foes.
> Bow and spear in hand, he pressed on.
> Between blue cliffs, near roaring rapids
> And gloomy gorges of the Urals,
> Tireless Kor found them—
> In a dense fir wood, the Voguls.
> Fearless, he fell upon them
> On misty, sapphire peaks beyond Siberia.
> Syamdei the Ostyak warrior,
> Berendelya, chieftain of the Voguls—
> They hurled spears at our hero,
> Swung sharp blades in wrath.
> But the Permian knight slept not:
> Like a stag, he leapt;
> Like an Arctic fox, he sprang.
> Kor pierced one with his spear,
> Felled another with an arrow—
> That very one hailed as king
> Of the Ostyak lands.
> The moon bore witness,
> The sun rejoiced in battle!
> Thus Perm’s glory spread
> Beyond azure mountains
> Into the golden East.
> Ostyaks, Voguls, Utris—all bowed
> To Tsar Kor, whose realm stretched
> From the headwaters of the bright Kama,
> The yellow Vyn’va, the red Chanyva,
> And nameless streams that flow southward

> To the Sarydj Sea, where flocks of birds
> Take wing each rain-drenched autumn.

So sang the bard, and all listened in silence. After his song and the resonant chords of the domra, merriment swelled anew. The mead-bowl and silver cups circled faster. Laughter and voices filled the hall.

But then the bard spoke again, and the domra's strings trembled:

> Now I sing of Redigar,
> Son of the Tsar, ever-lauded!
> He sailed far to Biarmia bright,
> Where the Ezva meets the sea,
> Where Great Dvina blooms in majesty,
> Its shores kissed by Sarydj's icy waves—
> There stand cities crowned in gold.
> Redigar, guided by wind and stream,
> Reached the river's mouth at last,
> His white sail bearing him northward,
> Nearer to the Kalenik birds,
> To distant Kardor's towers.
> There, unafraid, he sought King Ramday,
> And saw his daughter Taryana—
> Fair maid in a pine-wood hall.
> Together they offered sacrifice,
> Praying to Yumala for Redigar's health.
> And Ramday gave his daughter's hand
> To Kor's son from eastern lands,
> From ruddy dawn and sapphire Kama.
> "You are my destined husband," she said,
> Placing her white hand in his.
> "Tarry with us awhile—
> Till the waning of the autumn moon,
> From strawberry bloom to sweet bilberry,
> From scarlet lingonberry
> To variegated cloudberry in marshy bogs,
> Until the sky-flocks take flight,
> Their wings whispering southward

> To warm and luminous shores.
> When I hear their cries and joyful clamor,
> I shall follow you—
> Down the forested Ezva,
> Through unknown tributaries,
> To Kama’s banks, to Iskor’s heights.”

And so Redigar brought her home. All marveled at her beauty.

> “Daughter of Dvina, flower of Biarmia,
> Blue-eyed, fair-faced!” cried the women.
> “One crescent moon rules the heavens—
> Yet in Komiland, Taryana
> Outshines us all in grace.”

The bard paused, then strummed again. Joy reigned—but one man neither laughed nor drank: young Michamort, Kor’s younger son. Long had love’s arrow—shot by Shonda-pi, radiant son of the Sun—pierced his heart. He had met Taryala, daughter of priest Baramort, in the woods and loved her deeply. But she remained unmoved—neither tears nor sighs softened her. She stood harder than the cliff on which Iskor was built.

Tsar Kor, merry yet observant, noted his son’s pallor and silence but delayed inquiry—accustomed to ponder words before speaking.

Meanwhile, the moon climbed higher, casting shifting patterns of light and shadow—tree limbs etching ghostly runes upon the tower walls.

The feast continued.

Suddenly, the doors burst open. In strode the dread priest—servant of god Voypel—none other than Baramort himself. Owl-down clung to his shoulders; sable and ermine adorned him. Iron and copper rings pierced his flesh, and steel knives glinted in torchlight.

Removing his fox-fur cap, he revealed silver hair, raised his arms to the sky, and thundered:

> “Great Tsar of many-peaked Perm!
> Your son has shamed my daughter this eve
> Before the moon’s accusing rise,
> In Voypel’s sacred grove!
> The North Wind—the keen-eared Voypel—is enraged!
> All gods know of it!
> My evening offering is rejected:
> Smoke sinks earthward, not heavenward.
> Through crimson flame and clear waters
> Of holy vessels, I beheld
> Our nation’s doom—defeat, despair!
> Your son Michamort is to blame:
> He dishonored my child,
> Broke into my home in the sacred wood,
> And left her alone.
> When I returned to my household idol—Vorshud—
> I found her weeping, garments torn,
> While the offender vanished among the trees.
> Act swiftly, Tsar Kor! Appease the gods—
> Their wrath is terrible!
> End this feast! Rush to sacrifice
> In the house of the gods…
> Calamity comes—
> On black wings it flies!
> Delay the hour that will not wait!”

Having spoken, Baramort departed, leaving all struck dumb—as if thunder had shattered their revelry.

Tsar Kor leaned on his mighty arms, head bowed, red beard resting on the table. Michamort stared wide-eyed at his father; Redigar watched Michamort; nobles exchanged uneasy glances in silence.

At last, noble Burmat—the Tsar’s finest warrior—spoke:

> “Gracious Tsar Kor!
> Let us not grieve or end our feast so suddenly.
> The priest came unbidden—perhaps dreamt it all?
> He is very old.
> If Michamort erred, do not rage:

> He is still young.
> And what true harm? Is it strange
> That a prince—fair as a woodland bloom—
> Should seek a humble maiden?
> Only this grieves us: it happened
> In Voypel's hallowed grove,
> Where ancient goddesses Ibma dwell.
> But the gods love you, Kor.
> They'll accept your offerings.
> The goddesses won't long remember
> What occurred before moonrise."

Others echoed Burmat, defending Michamort and blaming the priest's haste.

Then Tsar Kor lifted his head and addressed the bard:

> "Comfort me, inspired singer!
> With music of great songs and sacred words—
> Sing to us of gods and mighty Perm!"

And once more Vormort sang, fingers brushing sinew-strung domra:

> Dread gods above!
> Unstop your ears—
> Hear the domra's call,
> The tender, solemn hymn!
> We summon you
> Not to sorrow, but to joy!
> In pale moonlight,
> Push back our mortal hour,
> Lengthen life's thread—
> For days flee swiftly
> In this fleeting world.

> En—the great one, mother of sun and moon,
> She who flies as a divine duck across the blue;
> And the fearsome, three-headed, winged god—
> Solar face unseen by night,
> Soaring by day o’er earth!
> They gaze down patiently
> Through crystal halls of heaven.
> Sometimes they blanket our hills in snow,
> Sometimes wash the earth with celestial rain—
> Tenderly, lovingly.
>
> Yet justice here is weighed
> By other spirits:
> Voypel the Terrible, mountain whirlwind, keen-eared—
> He awaits our prayers and sacrifices.
> Beneath the soil dwells Kul, the somber god,
> Who gathers souls and judges sinners.
> Mother Muma feeds all children
> In this black-and-white world—
> Born of her and Sun-Father,
> Not without pain.
>
> But our gods love Kor—
> Gracious lord of all lands
> Along the sapphire Kama.
> Do not grieve, mighty warrior!
> The gods stand with you:
> They’ll turn aside enemy blades,
> Deflect spear-thrusts,
> Make death-arrows hum past like bees.
>
> Your wondrous city, perched on stone,
> Is shielded by forested taiga.
> Foreign hosts dare not approach
> This land of nameless rivers,
> Of towering, trackless wilds.
> They’ll halt afar, glance once,
> Wave in dismay, and flee—

> Cowed by azure heights,
> Gloomy peaks, roaring streams.
>
> Rejoice, beloved Perm!
> You're guarded by distance,
> Grey stone, dense woods,
> Labyrinthine trails,
> Brief summers, storm-winds,
> And endless winter—
> Deep, clinging, impassable.
>
> Flourish in forests, crown the hills,
> Dwell by hidden headwaters,
> Murmuring springs, rustling brooks.
> May tales of valor,
> Of taiga knights and ancient lore,
> Echo through fir woods,
> Amid crimson pines,
> On flowered glades—
> Where daisies and roses
> Soothe our eyes.
>
> Shine on, golden Perm!
> Seek not southern enchantments—
> Point your feet only northward!
> Tread boldly through taiga,
> Fear not mossy tundra
> Nor ocean's icy waves—
> For our gods cherish
> The quiet, glorious North!
> They will not leave it—
> Not east, west, or fiery south—
> Unless fate itself commands!

Ten strings thrummed loudly. The Tsar's spirit lifted. He raised his cup—and all followed.

Dawn already blushed behind Mount Polyud, Pomayannaya, and Kworkusha's peak when guests dispersed. Kor remained alone with Michamort.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I did two things,” said Michamort. “One good, one evil. Praise the first, punish the second.

“I went to Kolva’s wooded headwaters, between bluish crags. High above the river, in a cliff fissure, I found a cave—and inside, a vast egg laid by the great bird Ryk. It lay like grey stone in the dark. I touched it gently, did not break it, then sealed the entrance with brush and boulders so beasts or fools might not harm it.

“Descending Kolva’s swift current, I met Taryala by a brook that tumbles over colored stones into the calm river. I’ve loved her long. I leapt from my boat and chased her. She fled into Voypel’s dread forest, reached her father’s hut, and rushed inside. I followed—and there, madness took me. Grief and love clouded my mind. I used force.

“Afterward, I vanished among the trees. She stood on the porch, screaming for her father.

“That is all, Father.”

Red-bearded Kor listened, then said:

“Go rest. Perhaps the gods will show mercy.”

Michamort withdrew. But Kor sat long at his window, thoughts churning, heavy with dread. Even after sunset painted the eastern peaks like distant clouds, he did not sleep.

“I must appease the gods—offer a black bull, a ram with a white mark, a golden duck. I’ll wed Michamort to Taryala to soothe the priest. And reinforce the garrison at Yokchi!”

With this resolve, he retired after the noisy night.

II

Scarcely a moon’s cycle passed before terror seized Iskor’s folk: a horde approached—mounted, bow-armed, cruel, pitiless.

Tsar Kor, his sons, and nobles mounted the walls. From the high tower, he saw warriors in crimson kaftans and fur hats, astride swift horses, armed with long spears and sharp sabers. Their weapons flashed in sunlight; their red coats burned like fire amid green woods. The unknown host advanced—while Perm’s army fled before them.

Two ridges yet separated the foe from the city.

Brave Kor—the Permian champion—sent his sons, Burmat, and Porsyur to rally the retreating troops in the dark, pathless forests between the hills. He himself watched the crimson tide and planned Iskor's defense.

> "Could the old priests' prophecy come true?
> 'We are not meant to stay—northward we must go,
> To icy seas and grassy tundra!'
> So be it, if gods will it.
> But I, old raven, will defend my stone nest
> To my last breath—on cliffs where only hawks soar!"

Heartened by Redigar and Burmat, the Permians turned and fought. Redigar, spear and saber in hand, rode onto a clearing and challenged a crimson-clad warrior. A giant on a bay horse answered. Spears clashed—sparks flew from mail, yet both riders held firm as carved stone. Their steeds collided so fiercely both toppled. Sabers flashed like lightning.

A roar erupted—thunderous, shaking air and echoing through forests and crags.

Armies crashed like storm-clouds. Arrows hissed like lightning. Clanging mail, whistling shafts, saber-strokes, neighing horses, dying groans, victory cries, falling trees—all filled glades, riverbanks, and wild thickets. Heaven trembled; earth mourned her children slaughtering one another.

Battle spread like wildfire—from riverbanks to hills, into virgin taiga. Warriors fought at tree roots, on branches, even swaying treetops.

From his tower, Kor sent reinforcements—but by noon, his forces faltered. Knees buckled; arms wearied against endless foes who seemed to spring from the earth itself. At dusk, survivors crawled mouse-like up the mountain under city walls, while strangers encircled Iskor in a ring of red.

Night fell black. Iskor's folk lit great bonfires along the cliff-edge, weapons ready. Far off, wolves and foxes howled over corpses. Ravens and sharp-eyed kites circled pine and spruce tops.

At midnight, a cloud covered the city—but it was no cloud. It was the bird Ryk. With wings outstretched, she sheltered Iskor and spoke in human voice:

> “The hour is fulfilled. The impregnable city shall fall. All shall perish—save the inspired bard Vormort, gracious Tsar Kor, ill-fated Michamort, and his bride-to-be!”

Then she lifted away—this time not shielding them. Dark days began for Perm—days of unspeakable sorrow.

Kor, once decided, stood firm. At sunrise, red-clad men swarmed the cliff like swifts—hiding in caves, gripping ledges, clutching juniper bushes.

Kor ordered logs, boiling pitch, stones, and ash hurled down. Giant pines, somber firs, white birches crashed upon invaders like fallen titans. Pitch flowed in fiery torrents. Enemies plummeted into ravines like fledglings cast from nests.

“Their leader, watching from a golden tent, muttered:
‘These are no men—they’re Gogimagog demons, trapped here by Alexander of Macedon! What do they want? We’ll starve them out—that lion’s den!’”

Yet again they climbed—and again fell.

The siege lasted from waning moon to full, and back to waning. The foe grew weary, begging their chief to return home:

> “Enough! These wild hills hold no treasure, no spoils! Few people dwell by these swift, unwelcoming rivers!”

But the chief hesitated—fate had drawn him north to simple folk.

Meanwhile, Permian bards sang from walls and towers:

> Defend great Perm and Kor—
> Gracious lord of swift Kama,
> Bright Kolva, golden Vyn’va!
> Rivers rich with silver salmon,
> Golden-scaled, red-finned, gleaming!

> Brave archers—draw your bows!
> Sweet is the twang of string,
> Delightful the arrow’s hum!
> Guard our land of ermine,
> Of red fox and stoat,
> Of clear streams and free-flying birds—
> Grouse, sleepy blackcock, gentle ptarmigan!
>
> Help comes from east! Reinforcements ride from west!
> Fear not, children of Perm—
> To die at home is sweet,
> To fall defending the city
> Where you knew golden days,
> Song’s chime, emerald winter tales,
> Topaz light of folk wisdom!
>
> Your wives and children plead with you.
> Arrow-storms can’t fell the taiga;
> Sabers break on brave hearts;
> Spears frighten only cowards!
>
> Fear not these narrow-eyed strangers,
> Yellow-faced in crimson coats!
> Rain ends—so too this battle.
> Locusts eat their fill—then fly south!
>
> Be bold, Permian warrior!
> Defy fate’s blows!
> Thus we sing the song of battle,
> The sweetness of death!
>
> Guard great Perm and Kor—
> Wondrous city, hilltop beacon,
> Glory of many-sung Perm!
> No treachery shall breach you,
> O jewel among peaks,
> Topaz amid grey stone!

> Heaven’s gods forbid
> These strangers entry
> Into our purple-roofed towers,
> Beneath our temple eaves!
>
> Take heart, children of Komi!
> Defend great Perm and Kor!

Priests chanted spells, hurling dark curses toward sky and earth.

Then heaven answered: torrential rains swelled rivers, sweeping hills into valleys—straight onto the foreign camp. The invaders fled; muddy waves pursued them.

On Urals’ crest, bird Ryk watched, awaiting judgment from Enmar—Lord of Mortals and Immortals, who sat reading the Golden Book of Fates.

Silent, Enmar weighed destinies.

Then Ryk cried:

> “Great God, enthroned on iron-heaven’s golden roof!
> Shall my prophecies fail?
> Are your decrees void?
> Does the heavenly book lie?”

Enmar heard—and decreed Iskor’s fall by sword and flame.

Rain ceased. The rainbow Ogka-Megika descended, stretched her neck, and drank dry every stream and spring. Green plains lay bare. The crimson host returned.

On a dark autumn night—when least expected—they scaled the walls. Towers shattered under rams. Iskor burned.

Kor and his men still fought on temple roofs… but one by one, they fell to saber-strokes. The final hour tolled. Hawks already pecked nestlings in the eyrie.

There stood Kor and Michamort, with trembling Vormort clutching his domra. The Tsar still raised his sword high, cleaving enemy heads—Michamort at his side.

Suddenly—a cloud! Bird Ryk swooped, seizing Kor, Michamort, and Vormort on her back.

She soared high—past enemy ranks, cliffs, forests—like morning's first light.

Only over Voypel's sacred grove did she pause, wings spreading like twin white clouds. She landed at the priest's hut and took Baramort and fair-haired Taryala—seed for future tribes.

Northward flew mysterious Ryk—to Vycheqda's headwaters. There, on Djedjim-Parma's sapphire, forested peak, she set them down:

> "Live here. Look north—to the reindeer sea!
> Dwell until ocean waves freeze!"

Then, with storm-and-rain roar, she ascended into blue heavens and vanished among distant Urals.

Epilogue

On Djedjim, Kor and Michamort dwelt in a hut with Taryala. With them were the priest and bard Vormort.

Kor urged Michamort to gather folk along yellow Vycheqda, build a city, levy tribute, and forge a strong realm in the wild woods.

But an old man—whether god or forest spirit, none knew—appeared and said:

> "We need no armies, no kingdoms.
> We live free—as forest beasts, as sky-birds.
> Southern folk devour grain, game, ore—
> They march north… but not yet here.
> While we breathe freely—children of great En—we need nothing more."

And he vanished.

Michamort obeyed. Tsar Kor, longing for sapphire Kolva and his stone nest, soon died beneath a tall fir in the taiga.

Michamort embraced a new life—imitating fish and birds, not southern predators who torment themselves and others on the world's edge.

Bard Vormort wandered the woods, singing and lamenting on his domra:

> Dread fate has come—
> Bird Ryk carried us
> Over mountains, rivers, vales
> To distant northern lands,
> To sandy Ezva's shores,
> Djedjim-Parma's height.
>
> I weep for Kama—
> Bright, gentle stream!
> Rivers of tears I shed
> For that radiant past,
> For Kor's luminous realm,
> For shadowed, sun-dappled cliffs!
>
> Petrified, unseen—
> Where are you, Iskor?
> Peerless jewel of the East,
> Emerald midst misty hills,
> Topaz amid dark stone!
> Treasure in wilderness,
> Heart of life, shining city—
> Ash now, by southern hands!
>
> I weep, lone bard,
> Rivers of tears I shed
> For you, beloved Iskor!
> Never shall I forget
> Your radiant form.
>
> I'll sing Perm's glory,
> Fill valleys and peaks with song!
> May domra's notes teach
> Far peoples and unborn kin:
> How great Kor suffered
> For distant glory—
> So Iskor fell

> For brides yet unborn,
> So strings might tremble,
> So songs might echo
> Of Komiland's vanished splendor,
> Of dreadful, mighty deeds—
> Though future folk may not understand!
>
> Dark taigas, hear my lament!
> Carry my tears
> To generations yet unborn—
> Forget nothing:
> Kor's great deeds,
> Proud Perm's suffering!
>
> I weep, unconsolable,
> Rivers of tears I shed…

Thus sang the bard—and his words lingered in shadowed taigas, sunlit pines, birdsong, and rustling leaves.

From them, I learned this ancient tale of Tsar Kor.

—K. Zhakov
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